

TOWARDS AN APPRECIATION OF LITERATURE

TOWARDS AN APPRECIATION OF LITERATURE

By
FRANK O'CONNOR

1945
METROPOLITAN PUBLISHING CO. LTD.
32 BACHELOR'S WALK
DUBLIN

NOTE

As this book is one of a series I have not dealt with Poetry and Drama except where it was necessary to clarify the argument. These subjects are being dealt with by others.

F. O'C.

PRINTED IN IRELAND

BY CAHILL & CO. LTD., PARKGATE PRINTING WORKS, DUBLIN
FOR METROPOLITAN PUBLISHING CO. LTD., DUBLIN

TOWARDS AN APPRECIATION OF LITERATURE

I

AS THIS LITTLE BOOK IS INTENDED AS AN INTRODUCTION TO literature, I may, perhaps, begin by describing my own introduction to it.

My parents were poor and I was an only child. That meant that from the beginning I was thrown very much upon myself, so I learned to read when I was still very young. The only papers I could afford or come by were English school stories. Those papers have been brilliantly and devastatingly analysed by George Orwell, and I feel sure they were just as snobbish and silly as he suggests. They dealt with young fellows whose fathers had titles and cars and who had lots of money to spend in the tuck shop. They were, I am certain, just as bad for me as love stories for a servant girl, except that I am not at all certain that love stories are bad for servant girls, nor have I ever been able to bring myself to believe that Mme. Bovary really did go to pieces as a result of reading the novels of Scott.

Undoubtedly, like love stories with servant girls, they created standards of behaviour in my mind which could not be fitted in to the life about me. I don't honestly think that those standards were ever standards of money or rank. I liked the public school code so far as it was reflected in them, and I still like it. I liked boys who didn't tell lies, and who didn't split on one another when they were caught out. In the same way, I believe that love stories give servant girls (and other girls) ideals of manners and behaviour which they do not find among their boy friends, but I am not at all sure that the fault is not with the boy friends rather than with the story books. Anyway, outside the work of some French naturalists, I cannot think of any form of literature in which the reader is safe from ideals of char-

The rest of my education was acquired haphazard in a public library. It was a very good library, run by an Englishman who took his work seriously; yet, in spite of that, and in spite of the fact that I became a public librarian myself, public libraries seem to me terrible places with a degrading air of institutionalism and of pseudo-professionalism. They still function as a branch of local government without reference to any system of education. I know that your true auto-didact is a tough Alpine plant, and though not very beautiful in himself, is guaranteed to grow almost anywhere with the minimum of attention, but it seems to me that the minimum requires that the public library should be utilised as part of an adult educational system; should be a centre for lectures, recitals and exhibitions of art sufficient to ensure that the borrowers know at least how to use it.

Thanks to public libraries my own education was as slow and painful as it could well be, given my temperament. Those were the days before borrowers were allowed even to see the shelves and one had to choose one's books from a card catalogue. School stories apart, the only things I knew anything about were the two things which every Irish child knows far too much about: politics and religion. Having almost poisoned my mind by reading every standard Irish patriotic book, I got on to the works of Canon Sheehan, a clerical novelist with a delightful habit of quoting Goethe's poems in the original. With the simple optimism of the auto-didact, I decided that it would be a good idea to learn German and meanwhile to read all Goethe in English. Somehow or other I managed to do both in a sort of way; heaven knows how, for I had left school before we got so far as long division, and I was twenty before I found out what the simplest grammatical terms meant. I tried my hand at writing, in Irish, another language which I was under the impression I knew, and finally something I published in a weekly paper attracted the attention of an old teacher of mine, a fine novelist, who, before I could waste any more of my life, introduced me to English literature. He also introduced me to Seán O Faolain, a few years older than myself. When I was twenty-three or four I got a job in a public library with a poet who made me read Yeats, Pound, Eliot and the rest of

the moderns, criticised my early efforts at writing and introduced me to A.E. who published my first articles and poems; and to him I owe the most pleasant period of my education.

I came to literature as I fancy a great many people come to it, because they need companionship, and a wider and more civilised form of life than they can find in the world about them, all the more since that world is being more and more steadily drained of whatever beauty it had; but the city of literature is just as big and complicated as any other capital, and a man can be just as lonely there. It has its sharks and bores, its snobbish quarters and stews, and a great many quiet suburbs where all sorts of obscure and attractive people live. As I grow older, the books I put most value on are the good books of criticism like those of David Cecil on the Victorian novelists and Bonamy Dobree on the Restoration dramatists; but that sort of book is either very rare or else lives in the suburbs where I do not visit.

What leads me to think my own experience is not so eccentric as it may seem to some people, is that I was exceedingly lucky in having met so many men of talent by the time I was twenty odd. There must be many a great deal less lucky than that. You will see exactly how hard the struggle can be if you read the three volumes of Maxim Gorky's fine autobiography. What strikes me most looking back on it is the waste, the disproportion between the modest aim and the effort involved. I know the argument that obstacles develop the character, but it seems to me that character developed in that way is liable to develop all awry, and I shall continue to think so until I find some educationist who deliberately and successfully puts obstacles in the way of his students. Meanwhile the faults I contracted in those years will be with me till the day I die: the lack of method, the opinionatedness, and the inability to do the simplest thing without first pulling down the house to get at it.

II

THE FIRST THING THAT SEEMS TO EMERGE FROM THIS IS that the primary business of literature is entertainment. Children, who are frequently bored, and servant girls who are permanently bored, usually ask nothing else of it. If I

am tired, nothing refreshes me so much as a good detective story, for it is the form of literature which happens to make the least demand on my emotions and intelligence, though as Yeats once wisely remarked: "You can have too much detection in a detective story", or in the words of the captain of a Kerry football team: "Never mind the bloody ball! Let's get on with the game!"

But after reading three or four detective stories in quick succession I feel as if I had been on a very bad drunk. The entertainment has been merely diversion, not recreation. It is as if by some ingenious bit of mechanism one's heart has been stopped and re-started, so many hours during which one might as well have been dead. It would be better from my point of view if I had forced myself to read some Restoration comedy which has defeated me, and at least kept myself awake. We shall be dead long enough.

The point at which diversion begins to be recreation is the one which interests me now, because it is precisely at this point that I think imaginative literature begins. Let me take as example an old favourite of mine, Somerville and Ross's *An Irish R.M. and His Experiences*, the whole saga in the omnibus edition. On the surface this is diversion pure and simple, a series of misadventure, misunderstandings and practical jokes, invented by two women, and turning in their hands into a sort of game carried on with horrid schoolgirl vivacity. The humour, if you can call it humour, is of the same extravert, slapstick kind I remember from the public school stories of my boyhood. The supreme moment of fun is when the hero breaks his eyeglass or puts his foot through the aneroid barometer. The number of mishaps that occur at the local agricultural show passes all reckoning. The water jump dries up, the distracted stewards fill it with lime, the horses refuse to jump.

Why then do I not treat it as I should treat a detective story which had diverted me for a few hours, and get rid of it as speedily as possible? Why do I keep on reading the book year after year and grudgingly refuse to lend it to anybody except intimate friends? Read this, and decide for yourself:

If, as I suppose, the object was to delude the horses into the belief that it was a water jump, it was a total failure; they immediately decided it was a practical joke, dangerous and in indifferent taste. If, on the other side, a variety entertainment for the public was aimed at, nothing could have been more successful. Every known class of refusal was successfully exhibited. One horse endeavoured to climb the rails into the Grand Stand; another, having stopped dead at the critical point, swung round and returned in consternation to the starting point, with his rider hanging like a locket round his neck. Another, dowered with a sense of humour unusual among horses, stepped delicately over the furze-bushes, and amidst rounds of applause, walked through the lime with a stoic calm. Yet another, a ponderous warhorse of seventeen hands, hung, trembling like an aspen, on the brink, till a sympathiser, possibly his owner, sprang irrepressibly from his seat on the stand, climbed through the rails, and attacked him from behind with a large umbrella. It was during this three-cornered conflict that the green-eyed filly forced herself into the front rank of events. A chorus of "Hi, hi, hi!" fired at the rate of about fifty per second, volleyed in warning from the crowd round the starting point, and a white-legged chestnut with an unearthly white face and flying flounces of tawny mane and tail came thundering down upon the jump. Neither umbrella nor warhorse turned her by a hairsbreadth from her course, still less did her rider, a lean and long-legged country boy, whose single object was to keep upon her back.

To me the attractiveness of this is altogether in the writing. It is as though the authors, or rather the author, for two of them can hardly have written one paragraph, becomes amused herself at the absurdities she recounts, and suddenly it ceases to be merely entertainment, and becomes entertainment that is being commented on; I find myself listening to the voice of the commentator till she becomes a real person for me, somebody I know and like and enjoy, and though a part of my attention goes to what she is describing, it is not any longer for its own sake, but as an excuse for keeping her talking a little longer. And that "comment" seems to me to be what I mean when I talk of literature; a way of describing

and judging so vivid and personal that if I saw a passage in the same manner even in the wilds of Timbuctoo, I should say "That's Somerville and Ross!" It means that that particular voice is as clear in my mind as the voice of somebody I have known; that, in fact, I have made a new friend far more gifted than I am. A book like this is a real event because it is a form of experience.

Somerville and Ross are the sort of friends you make on sight. Jane Austen is the sort you may take ten years to know, and even then never acquire a taste for at all unless at the same time you are prepared to take lessons from her in good breeding and literary taste. If you open a book like *Emma* for the first time you are quite liable to find it very small beer. There is very little comedy visible to the naked eye. The hero doesn't break his monocle, put his foot through an aneroid barometer or arrive with a pair of grass-green dancing breeches instead of a present of salmon. There are misadventures of a sort; there are misunderstandings of a sort, but both are of a very quiet and apparently unimportant kind. The heroine does not use goat's milk at the tea party, but she does imagine that the hero, Mr. Knightly, disapproves of her when he is really in love with her. Even that misunderstanding is kept so quiet that you may quite easily read on without noticing that it has taken place. That is one of the little lessons in taste which Jane Austen teaches in passing, and once it is mastered, it becomes a subtle form of flattery. It persuades you that you are really divinely intelligent—quite divinely intelligent!—not one of these stupid people who need to have everything explained to them. Of course, a passage like this will cause *you* no difficulty whatever!

"I have heard it asserted," said John Knightly (John is the brother of Mr. Knightly who, Emma thinks, disapproves of her, and is married to Emma's sister, Isabella) "that the same sort of handwriting often prevails in a family; and where the same master teaches, it is natural enough. But, for that reason, I should imagine that the likeness must be chiefly confined to the females, for boys have very little teaching after an early age, and scramble into any hand they can get.

Isabella and Emma, I think, do write very much alike. I have not always known their writing apart."

"Yes," said his brother hesitatingly, "there is a likeness. I know what you mean—but Emma's hand is the strongest."

That is all! If you have spotted that Mr. Knightly instead of disapproving of Emma, is head over ears in love with her, you are naturally so pleased by the flattery that like Slipper you murmur: "Oh, divil so pleasant a day I ever spent!" and, if you haven't, after all, Miss Austen is a lady to her fingertips and never cries "Booby!" in a vulgar way; Emma herself hadn't spotted it either, for here she is, thirty pages later, talking to Harriet, the girl she had deluded into the belief that Mr. Elton loved her—and how well she has managed it!

"I do remember it," cried Emma. "I perfectly remember it. Talking about spruce beer. Oh! yes. Mr. Knightly and I both saying we liked it, and Mr. Elton's seeming resolved to learn to like it too. I perfectly remember it. Stop—Mr. Knightly was standing just here, was not he? I have an idea he was standing just here."

"Ah, I do not know. I cannot recollect. It is very odd, but I cannot recollect. Mr. Elton was sitting here, I remember, much about where I am now."

Once more, have you noticed that Emma is in love with Mr. Knightly and doesn't realise it herself? The flattery is so outrageous; the temptation to cry out that there is no other novelist but Jane Austen—meaning no other novelist who smooths our fur so delicately—should almost make us suspect some brand of snobbery in ourselves.

Again, so cleverly has it been done, so little does Jane Austen seem to expound her characters, that at a first reading it might almost seem that there was no commentator there at all. Oh, but isn't there? Read again that innocent speech of Mr. John Knightly's on the subject of handwriting, and ask yourself if it is really and truly the voice of Mr. John Knightly, a rising professional man, or the demure and almost deferential voice of Miss Austen, taking him off with just the faintest hint of malice. There the little claws are barely

perceptible, but watch how they come out in the following passage; the noble pathos of "probably with rather thinner clothing than usual", the dramatic emphasis of the arithmetic: 'five hours! four horses! four servants; five people!' Notice, too, how the passage goes on a shade too long, a sentence or two down the other side of the hill between delight and boredom.

"A man," said he, "must have a very good opinion of himself when he asks people to leave their own fireside, and encounter such a day as this, for the sake of coming to see him. He must think himself a most agreeable fellow; I could not do such a thing. It is the greatest absurdity—actually snowing at this moment! The folly of not allowing people to be comfortable at home, and the folly of people's not staying comfortably at home when they can! If we were obliged to go out such an evening as this by any call of duty or business, what a hardship we should deem it—and here are we, probably with rather thinner clothing than usual, setting forward voluntarily, without excuse, in defiance of the voice of nature, which tells man, in everything given to his view or his feelings, to stay at home himself, and keep all under shelter that he can; here are we setting forward to spend five dull hours in another man's house, with nothing to say or hear that was not said and heard yesterday and may not be said and heard again to-morrow. Going in dismal weather, to return probably in worse; four horses and four servants taken out for nothing but to convey five idle shivering creatures into colder rooms and worse company than they might have found at home!"

The art of living is the art of collecting and generalising from experiences, and literature with its events which are almost real events, like Emma's misunderstanding of Mr. Knightly's intentions, and its commentators who are almost real friends like Jane Austen, ekes out the little quantity of actual experience and friendship which is granted to us, and enables us to form a completer picture of life than we could ever hope to do without it. In writing this two passages came my way which seemed to me to define the purpose of literature as neatly as any definitions. One is that in which

Saint Simon, who had seen more of life than most of us can ever hope to do, criticises his old friend, Lauzun, who had commanded King James' army in Ireland, carried the Royal family to safety in France, been the lover of Mademoiselle and her all-but husband, been a prisoner in one of the King's dungeons, because—"never having read anything but fairy tales, he knew nothing but what he had seen himself." The second is David Cecil's conclusion to his essay on Jane Austen. "If I were in doubt as to the wisdom of one of my actions, I should not consult Flaubert or Dostoevsky. The opinion of Balzac or Dickens would carry little weight with me; were Stendhal to rebuke me it would only convince me that I had done right: even in the judgment of Tolstoy I should not put complete confidence. But I should be seriously upset, I should worry for weeks and weeks, if I incurred the disapproval of Jane Austen."

That, then, is literature, not a substitute for life but a completion and an explanation, which, if it always lacks the intensity of real experience, frequently makes up for it in profundity.

III

FOR ME, AND I THINK FOR MOST OF MY GENERATION, THE experience of literature came through the study of the 19th-century novel, and our views of literature are largely coloured and limited by that particular approach. I do not know whether another generation can approach literature in the same way, whether in some manner which I haven't yet detected, the 19th-century novel has not begun to date. For us it was still contemporary, and we could consider the fate of Mme. Bovary as if she were a next door neighbour, without referring to any historical notes to explain her to ourselves.

We were lucky in that, for the 19th-century novel still seems to me incomparably the greatest of the modern arts, the art in which the modern world has expressed itself most completely. You have merely to think of the names—*Jane Austen, Stendhal, Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Tolstoy, Balzac*, and these do not even skim the cream. It

is what the drama was to the Elizabethans and the Athenians, a popular art which was shared by the whole community, as the 18th-century novel wasn't, and the modern novel most certainly is not. I remember a most moving story of Kuprin's which describes how an old deacon of the Orthodox Church is called on to take part in the excommunication service against Tolstoy. At first the name of the person to be excommunicated doesn't convey anything to him, and he practises his chant with all the gusto of a popular singer. But gradually things begin to come back into his mind; scenes from Tolstoy's novel, *The Cossacks*; the unforgettable descriptions of the wild scenery and the courtship of Mariana and when the moment comes for him to intone the horrible curses of the excommunication service he bursts out into an exultant *Ad Multos Annos*. Tolstoy in Russia was worshipped as much as Dickens in England and for the same reasons. Can one imagine a parish priest in the world who would hesitate over the excommunication of a Proust or a Joyce?*

Our peculiar method of writing literary history by countries instead of by periods makes it difficult to realise what a literary phenomenon the 19th-century novel was or what it achieved. Dickens and Thackeray and Trollope tend to get dwarfed in the history of English literature, and I have just been glancing at a history of French literature from which, if I hadn't known better, I might have concluded that Stendhal and Flaubert were minor figures not worthy of being ranked with great poetic geniuses like Leconte de Lisle. You will not get that impression about the novel from Mrs. Woolf's wise and charming essays in *The Common Reader*, but you may, unless you happen to be of Russian parentage, come away from it with the feeling of that character in one of Dostoevsky's novels who, having gone into the matter carefully and decided that the Russian was an inferior race, came to the conclusion that the only honourable course open to him was suicide. The Russian novel, one gathers from Mrs. Woolf, is a quite different article

* As I corrected these proofs I found in an article by T. C. Murray a reference to an old woman he knew who always added to her prayers a special one for Dickens!

to the English novel, and so far superior that suicide may appear the only possible course. "Doubtful as we frequently are," she says, "whether either the French or the Americans, who have so much in common with us, can yet understand English literature, we must admit graver doubts still whether for all their enthusiasm, the English can understand Russian literature." And as if to prove that the French cannot possibly understand English literature, there chimes in the voice of a French critic, M. Maurois, whom I happen to be reading. "Let us note in passing that this philosophy (of Dickens) is admirably suited to the English temperament. This remark is important because it helps us to understand the immense popularity of Dickens. The English are at the same time sentimental, timid and obedient. Because they know they are too sentimental, they feel the need to keep a watch on themselves and dislike having their emotions roused without at the same time being offered a remedy. Because they are timid, they have little taste for direct attack upon an individual or an institution. They like the humorous form of attack because in appearance it allows the object attacked to remain."

Let me say at once that I do not believe that M. Maurois' misunderstandings of Dickens are proof of a peculiarly French inability to understand English literature or Mrs. Woolf's of Dostoevsky of an English inability to understand Russian literature. The misunderstanding, the falsification, is in the application to literature of standards which are only to a very minor degree relevant to the arts. It is an example of what I feel inclined to call the modern heresy, the betrayal of the classical heritage. You can scarcely open a book or paper without reading what "we Irish" or "we English" like, or what "the French" or "the Germans" approve. I have before me a witty and learned review of a book by Sacheverell Sitwell on *British Architects and Craftsmen*, which says: "Palladianism and the Picturesque represent two sides of the English character which belong together, as the exterior and interior of Moor Park belong together, or as tails and tweeds in our way of dressing."

Perhaps, having had an overdose of it in youth, I am more conscious of the absurdity of it in middle age. I have cycled

through Ireland collecting the views of the peasantry on the difference between themselves and the inhabitants of neighbouring counties, and have it on the unimpeachable authority of a Kilkenny woman that a Leix man would not go to the workhouse without a collar and tie.

The idea that there is such a thing as English literature is a convenient fiction which provides a suitable field for study for people who know only one language well. Of course, writers who live in the same country and are subjected to the same geographical conditions will tend to have certain characteristics in common. Swift, Wilde, Yeats and Joyce have certain characteristics like insolence, introspection and a tendency to wear a mask which are not uncommon among writers brought up in Ireland; Macpherson, who faked the Ossian translations, Boswell, Scott and Burns, as I shall probably have occasion to point out, have certain things in common which associate them in the Romantic revival; but similar common characteristics occur in people of one religion, whatever their nationality, in people of one profession, of one political party and even of one income group, and any form of literary criticism, like that of the Marxists, which concentrates on such incidental characteristics sooner or later goes off like M. Maurois into plain moonshine. Dickens could never have been a representative English writer for the simple reason that Dickens never was a representative Englishman.

It will, I think, be a real help to you in appreciating literature to remember that the only natural classification of European literature is by periods; that any English writer of the 18th century is likely to have more in common with a French writer of the 18th century than with any English writer of our time, and that, the further a period is removed from us in time, the more its literature becomes portion of history and has to be eked out by a knowledge of history.

It is much easier to understand the realistic novel if we remember that it is a 19th-century art, and a European art and that its variations are merely local. Here is a timetable jotted down from the handful of books on my own shelves within a few minutes:—

- 1850. *David Copperfield. The Scarlet Letter.*
- 1851. *House of the Seven Gables.*
- 1852. Tolstoy's *Childhood. Esmond.*
- 1853. *Bleak House.*
- 1854. *Hard Times.*
- 1855. *The Warden. Tolstoy's Sevastopol.*
- 1856. Turgenev's *Rudin.*
- 1857. *Mme. Bovary. Barchester Towers. Tolstoy's Youth.*
- 1858. Turgenev's *Liza. Goncharov's Oblomov. Clerical Life.*
- 1859. Tolstoy's *Family Happiness. Richard Feverel. On the Eve.*
- 1860. Tolstoy's *Cossacks. The Mill on the Floss.*

It is fairly clear even from such a limited chronology that the European novel is not three arts but one art, and that its origin, its development and decline must be traced to a common source. It seems to me to be the characteristic art of the middle classes, released by the French Revolution from their intellectual dependence on the aristocracy. Though it spread to other countries, it is mainly a product of England, France and Russia; Germany, for some reason, never seems to have produced a novelist. As an art form it is really the abortive comedy of humours and trades of Shakespeare's day raised to the maximum power. "I will have a citizen and he shall be of my own trade"; as the character in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* says: "I will have a grocer and he shall do admirable things." It satisfies a deep longing of the middle classes in every century for the study of society, classes, professions and trades instead of the study of classical antiquity, but whereas these had always been treated as something which had to be apologised for, they are now treated with the greatest seriousness, and as the form develops you find novelists specialising in the description of certain professions, naval, military and clerical, for instance.

The morality which motivates it is largely that of the merchant classes who produced Protestantism, and it has suffered by it in more ways than the obvious one of being subjected to the intensest form of literary censorship. It

moves within the narrowest range; a scruple about a public position or a misunderstanding about a cheque is all the motivation Trollope needs for a story, and *Anna Karenina* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* show us just how far it could afford to go in sympathy for sexual offences. Yet at the same time, this simple clear workmanlike ethic gives it a characteristic note of deep human feeling which may perhaps preserve it from the fate of Elizabethan tragedy, forever sunk because of its moral anarchy. It is a profoundly serious art—sometimes as in Tolstoy's *Sevastopol* we get the impression that never before has so grave a subject been adequately treated;—is respectful of human life and dignity, and from the very beginning has been the normal medium for the expression of humanitarian sentiment.

Though Jane Austen was the first great novelist of the century, the novel as such owes nothing to her. Before it could ever become the great popular art of the middle classes the instrument had to be enlarged and given tones which were never within her range. It had to be made capable of expressing passionate emotion, and as much sensibility as the 18th century had expended on the novel, it had never succeeded in making it fit for much more than light comedy. It had now to find an equivalent for the poetry of Elizabethan tragedy, and that equivalent may almost be said to be the invention of Scott. If you take any typical passage of Sterne, Fielding or even Jane Austen and put it side by side with an equally typical passage of Scott, regardless of whether it is description or dialogue, it is exactly like playing a tune first on a harpsichord and then on a grand piano. The difference is accounted for by Scott's superb use of local colour, a thing which seems quite normal to us but was a marvel to his own generation. "As a house," Jane says tartly, "Barton Cottage though small was comfortable and compact; but as a cottage it was defective, for the building was regular, the roof was tiled, the window-shutters were not painted green, nor were the walls covered with honeysuckle." And that is all we ever hear about the home of Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, nor, indeed, is the description of the two heroines much more informative. When Jane Austen wants to describe a character, she does not begin by a study of his behaviour and language.

She assumes that as the character is a member of a certain class, these will be just like anybody else's. She watches the working of his mind, and it is the uncanny knowledge she shows of Mr. John Knightly's mental processes which gives us the impression that the man has been described. But Scott would describe the cottage, every crack in it, the landscape, the lighting; he would draw men and women, misshapen and powerful, and give us the very ring of character in a speech. Rob Roy knows that Bailie Jarvie will not arrest him "first for auld langsyne;—second, for the sake of the auld wife ayont the fire at Stuckavallachan, that made some mixture of our bluids, to my own proper shame be it spoken! that has a cousin wi' accounts, and yarn winnles, and looms and shuttles like a mechanical person;—and, lastly, Bailie, because if I saw a sign of your betraying me, I would plaster that wa' with your harns ere the hand of man could rescue you." The tune may only be something out of *Trovatore*; but the sheer volume of sound, the intoxicating effect of the magnificent instrument can still excite us across the years.

It excited his contemporaries so effectively that men as great as Balzac and Gogol assumed that to emulate Scott, they, too, had to write historical romances, and it was only gradually that it dawned on them that the appropriate use of local colour was in realistic stories. The greatest of Scott's immediate successors, Stendhal, was the only one who wasn't swept away by the flood of local colour. In Balzac, Dickens and Gogol story-telling for a time loses all cohesion. What the middle classes had always desired, they pour out brimful and overflowing: sentiment and character exaggerated into emotionalism and caricature; the romance of trade, wealth and luxury; the humours of law and government, all in the marvellous medium which Scott had created. "Fog everywhere," writes Dickens. "Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights." Their intoxication with it leads them into abysses of absurdity, for not only will Balzac paint you an unforgettable description of the old miser Grandet's house, he will tell you exactly what rises in funded

securities enabled him to increase his wealth, or make use of an impassioned declaration of love to introduce a fresh dab of it. "Eve, dearest," says David in *Lost Illusions*, "this is the first moment of pure and unmixed joy that fate has given to me! . . . Since the downfall of the Empire, calico has come more and more into use because it is so much cheaper than linen. At the present moment paper is made of a mixture of hemp and linen rags, but the raw material is dear, and the expense naturally retards the great advance which the French press is bound to make. Now you cannot increase the output of linen rags, a given population gives a pretty constant result, and it only increases with the birth-rate. To make any perceptible difference in the population for this purpose, it would take a quarter of a century and a great revolution in habits of life, trade and agriculture. And if the supply of linen rags is not enough to meet one-half nor one-third of the demand, some cheaper material than linen rags must be found for cheap paper. . . . The Angouleme paper-makers, the last to use pure linen rags, say that the proportion of cotton in the pulp has increased to a frightful extent of late years."

By 1850, if you look at the little time-table I have drawn up, you will see that that sort of story-telling was already old-fashioned, and Trollope in England, Flaubert in France and Turgenev in Russia could afford to turn up their noses at it, as two at least of them did. But the Russians were the luckiest, for in their country there was a hereditary aristocracy which took to the new middle-class art, and accordingly we get novels and stories which can use the whole of society for a keyboard, while in other countries, particularly in England where social stratification is well-defined, characters tend to be falsified whenever they move outside the author's own class.

In Turgenev's *Sportsman's Sketches*, which were being published through the forties, we find this new, artistic sort of story-telling, and with it a new technical device which was to be very important in Russian literature, above all in the short story. If you take one of the stories, *Byezhin Meadow*, written in 1851, you find it contains nothing but a description of the author alone with a lot of little boys who

are minding the family horses in the meadow one summer night and who pass the hours telling ghost stories. It is many years since I read it first, but I can still remember the thrilling effect of those children's voices whispering under the great arch of the night sky. Few stories convey such an overwhelming sense of the mystery of life. Now, if you compare a thriller with a novel by Trollope, say, you will see that one of the great problems of the story-teller is to carry the reader's attention on by spinning a yarn, yet at the same time to spin it in such a way that when the reader's curiosity is satisfied he doesn't throw the book away as most people do with even the best detective stories; to stop that leakage at the end and force the reader to look at it complete as if it were a picture. Even a very great novel like Stendhal's *Charterhouse of Parma* leaks at the end like that; each time you read it, your growing familiarity with the story makes it lose something, whereas the story-teller's ideal is to write in such a way that the more your interest in the story slackens, the more you should be interested in the detail.

In the use of local colour Scott had shown one method for holding up the episodic quality of a story, but what Turgenev did in *A Sportsman's Sketches* was to graft on to the story, the formal, static quality of an essay or a poem, so that when the interest of one was exhausted, the other came into play. The practice of that sort of writing which magazine editors still dismiss as "the sketch" enabled the Russian writers, particularly Chekhov, who seems to me to have steeped himself in the study of Turgenev, to do something which other writers rarely achieved, and compose novels with the bare minimum of episodic interest. "To do something with the least possible number of movements is the definition of grace," said Chekhov. It isn't, but it is the definition of the peculiar sort of grace which we find in Turgenev's stories and his own.

Turgenev's passionate lyricism—he was really a spoiled poet, and even in this story, the English translation I have read seems to me to miss something of the hush and mystery he evokes—makes him an uncertain story-teller. Like Thackeray, he has a fondness for writing his stories in the guise of an old man, looking back upon his youth, which

gives them a certain unity of tone, and a delightful nostalgic colouring, but it is always a dangerous device for the writer, for the sentimentality of retrospection tends to rob character of its preciseness and incidents of their importance. "It'll all be the same in a hundred years"; "vanity of vanities" or as a little girl in an Irish village once expressed it to me, "The flowers is fading and we'll soon be fading ourselves", sentiments proper to poets, are most dangerous to writers who must show us in the light of eternity the importance of a missing cheque for twenty-five pounds. Yet at his best, in novels like *Fathers and Children* and *Torrents of Spring* and in his own characteristic form, the short novel or long short story like *The Watch*, *Punin and Baburin* and *Old Portraits*, he seems to me greater than any Russian writer with the exception of Chekhov. The death of the old nobleman in *Old Portraits* is a perfect example of the blending of retrospective sentiment with precise and restrained observation.

"No, no pain . . . but it's difficult . . . difficult to breathe." Then after a brief silence: "Malania," he said, "so life has slipped by—and do you remember when we were married . . . what a couple we were?" "Yes, we were, my handsome, charming Alexis!" The old man was silent again. "Malania, my dear, shall we meet again in the next world?" "I will pray God for it, Alexis," and the old woman burst into tears. "Come, don't cry, silly; maybe the Lord God will make us young again then—and again we shall be a fine pair!" "He will make us young, Alexis!" "With the Lord all things are possible," observed Alexis Sergeitch. "He worketh great marvels!—maybe he will make you sensible. . . . There, my love, I was joking; come, let me kiss your hand." "And I yours." And the two old people kissed each other's hands simultaneously.

Let me confess that as often as I have read that story, I cannot even transcribe this passage without emotion. It is as close as makes no difference to being fine poetry, but in all my reading of Tolstoy I have never come across a single passage which moved me in the slightest. Tolstoy's supreme quality as a story-teller is a wonderful narrative gift which

enables him to see and describe with absolute verisimilitude whatever the characters are doing and thinking. In everything he is the very opposite of Turgenev. Where Turgenev is always too relaxed, too inclined for an emotional sprawl, Tolstoy seems to have electricity in his veins instead of blood, and as I read I cannot help murmuring to myself: "That's all right, old man, relax now! The story's going splendidly; just forget about it for a few moments." But Tolstoy never seems to forget about it. These tiny, harsh, disjointed sentences are always rippling on with the purr of a well-oiled mowing machine, and wherever they pass they seem to sweep up everything in their path. Tolstoy is the perfect model for anybody who wants to learn the art of telling a story. The dreariest scene comes out as fresh as paint because of the minute observations and contradictions of which it is composed. There is an extraordinarily taut, braced, tonic quality about it.

"What is it?" asked Stepan Arkadyevitch, coming in and addressing his wife.

By the tone of his voice, both Kitty and Anna knew that the reconciliation had taken place.

"I wanted to instal Anna here, but we should have had to put up some curtains. No one knows how to do it, and so I must," said Dolly in reply to her husband's question.

"God knows if they have made it up," thought Anna as she noticed Dolly's cold and even tone.

"Don't, Dolly, don't make mountains out of molehills. If you like I will arrange everything."—

"Yes," thought Anna, "it must have been settled."

"I know how you arrange things," said Dolly with a mocking smile: "you give Matve an order which he doesn't understand, and then you go off, and he gets everything into a muddle."

"Complete, complete reconciliation, complete," thought Anna. "Thank God."

As story-telling pure and simple that passage couldn't be bettered. There is literally hardly a word in it which doesn't carry the reader's attention forward, and yet as with Turgenev

I wish for some more tonic quality, I cannot help wishing that Tolstoy would occasionally slow up, and let the emotion emerge. Compare with that passage I have quoted from *Old Portraits* this from Tolstoy's *Two Hussars*. It describes the feelings of a young officer who has lost the Government money with which he was entrusted at cards. One can imagine quite well how Turgenev would have done it; how the young officer, retiring to his bedroom, would lie upon the bed, thinking of his boyhood and of his mother. Tolstoy is much too vigorous for that sort of treatment, but it seems to me that he falls into the opposite fault, and by the time he has finished with the situation leaves us not caring what happens his hero.

"I have ruined my young life," he said to himself; not because he really thought he had ruined his young life—he was not indeed thinking about it at all—but the phrase happened to occur to his mind.

"What am I to do now?" he meditated. "Borrow from some one and go away." A lady walked along the pavement. "What a foolish looking lady!" he thought inconsequently. "There's no one to borrow from. I've ruined my young life." He reached the shops. A merchant in a fox-lined cloak was standing at the door of his shop touting for customers. "If I hadn't taken up the eight I should have made up what I'd lost." An old beggar-woman followed him whimpering. "There's no one to borrow from." A gentleman in a bear-skinned cloak drove by; a watchman stood still. "What could one do out of the ordinary? Take a shot at these people. No, it's a bore! I've ruined my young life. Ah, these are nice bridles hanging there with ornaments on them. I should like a drive in a sledge now with three horses—ah, the darlings!"

In 1857, the same year as Trollope's *Barchester Towers*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* appeared. Historically, it is probably the most important novel of the century. I do not mean it is the best, or even among the best; for myself I should not rank it with *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Red and Black* or *Vanity Fair*. It is easily the most beautifully written; per-

fectly proportioned, every paragraph containing some tiny picture beautifully drawn and coloured.

"Once, during a thaw, when the snow was melting off the roofs and the moisture oozing out of the trees in the courtyard, on reaching the door, she returned to fetch her parasol and opened it.

The silken parasol, coloured like a pigeon's breast, as it was pierced by the sunbeams, revealed with its shifting reflections the skin of her beautiful face. She smiled under the genial warmth while drops of water could be heard, one by one, fall on the stretched silk.

But no English translation can give you the poetic beauty of Flaubert's French, and really to know what sort of writer he was you need either to read him in French or study the effect of his style in the work of Joyce, who copied him very closely, as in this sentence from *The Portrait of the Artist*. "In the soft grey silence he could hear the bump of the balls: and from here and from there through the quiet air the sound of the cricket bats: pick, pack, pock, puck: like drops of water in a fountain falling softly in the brimming bowl." *Madame Bovary* has the beauty of a mediæval picture book; it is something to linger over and reread.

I am not so certain of the characterisation. It is the story of a middle-class woman who is so saturated with romantic fiction that she involves herself in discreditable love affairs, gets into debt, and finally commits suicide. Being a little that way inclined myself, I doubt whether romantic extravagance ever induced anybody to commit any crime more serious than the excesses of Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*; at least, without much graver faults of character to account for it; and these are not suggested by Flaubert. I have sat in court watching processions of poor girls who had gone to what the law believed to be the dogs, but never yet saw one of whom I could honestly say that she looked as though she had been influenced by D. H. Lawrence or Aldous Huxley. Nor do I think Flaubert believed it himself. He was essentially a satirist; he detested the French middle class in a way which was hardly known in England before the

nineties; and they returned the compliment by prosecuting *Madame Bovary* for indecency. It was largely this prosecution which made it the standard for what we now call Naturalism in fiction. The Naturalists—though their work does not become really important until much later in the century—shared Flaubert's views about the middle classes, and deplored the excesses into which writers like Balzac were drawn by their whole-hearted acceptance of middle-class standards. They prided themselves on not selecting and on not commenting. They simply picked on any particular aspect of life which came their way, and painted it as well as they could.

You will find a typical example of Naturalism in the second story of Joyce's *Dubliners*. Here two young fellows mitching from school meet a queer man who talks to them about little girls; goes away, comes back, and talks to them about little girls again, but in a quite different tone. What he is, and what he has been up to in the meantime are merely hinted at with a shrug of the shoulders. It is no business of Joyce's. "Here is an episode. This is where it begins; this is where it ends: now, watch me do it!" I have always suspected that that theory of writing must have originated in a painter's studio, for it is by its very nature unliterary. Literature, as I shall have occasion to remind you, is a frightfully impure art. A painter can paint a good-looking poisoner without bothering his head about whether or not he approves of poisoning on principle, but there is always something freakish about a writer who refrains from moral judgment and feeling. When Flaubert ends the story of *Herodias* with the lines, "And all three having taken the head of Iakokanann went off in the direction of Galilee. As it was very heavy, they carried it turn and turn about", he is writing artificially, to a theory, and puts me in mind of Miss Liza Doolittle's drawing-room manner as she inquires: "What call would a woman with that strength in her have to die of influenza? What become of her new straw hat that should have come to me? Somebody pinched it; and what I say is, them as pinched it done her in."

The fifties, sixties and seventies are the greatest period of the novel, and it would probably be true to say that in that

period not a year passed without the appearance of a work of major importance. English people put on a curiously coy air when they speak of Trollope, as though they had to apologise for liking him, but there is no need for apology, because Trollope was a novelist of the same rank as Jane Austen, though with a coarse streak which comes out all too plainly in his *Autobiography*. It was that coarse streak which made him spoil *Barchester Towers* by the introduction of the Stanhopes, and his masterpiece, *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, by padding it out to such a degree that in order to appreciate its true artistic quality, you have to skip almost every second chapter. But to find anything to equal the splendid seriousness and tenderness of the portrait of Mr. Crawley in that novel you have to turn to the stories like *Punin and Baburin* which Turgenev was writing about the same time.

Hardy's work comes later, and though he is far inferior to Trollope and George Eliot as a novelist, he is equally superior to both as a writer. Hardy is an extraordinary example of the importance of local colour in the novel, and in his work more than in that of any other novelist we can see that its real purpose is that of poetry in an Elizabethan play, a powerful cement which binds together a rubble of invention which, without it, would collapse in bathos. Whether he knew it or not, Hardy was affected by the Naturalists, and in him we can trace the development of a purely pictorial kind of writing derived from Flaubert. Unlike Flaubert, he never allows it to settle into neat little miniatures, and long before the cinema, had invented a technique which anticipates it, as in the wonderful opening of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* where he begins in the air high above the town as it lies in evening light; fades to a horizon view of it, far away and flat upon the plain, and then tracks slowly towards the tree-lined rampart which surrounds it, and down the main street, pausing to give us a close-up of shuttered window or inn-sign. No other writer has the same feeling for material as Hardy has; it is always of some artist that he reminds us, and as he describes the surface of something it is like examining a Cotman drawing in which we can identify the very quality of wood, tile and stone. With every rereading we suffer more from his scraggy plots and tongue-tied characters but put up

with them for those unforgettable paragraphs when somebody walks down a street and we can feel the heat reflected from the old, sun-warmed brick, or a wain of hay passes by the window and the faces of those inside are painted gold in the reflected light. "On the grey moisture of the grass were marks where the cows had lain through the night—dark-green islands of dry herbage the size of their carcasses in the general sea of dew. From each island proceeded a serpentine trail, by which the cow had rambled away to feed after getting up, at the end of which trail they found her; the snoring puff from her nostrils, when she recognised them, making an intenser little fog of her own amid the prevailing one." Poetry has no lovelier image of morning, nor an evening scene drawn with more tenderness and sureness than that first glimpse of Casterbridge.

The lamplights now glimmered through the engirdling trees, conveying a sense of great snugness and comfort inside, and rendering at the same time the unlighted country without strangely solitary and vacant in aspect, considering its nearness to life. The difference between burgh and champaign was increased too by sounds which now reached them above others—the notes of a brass band. The travellers returned into the High Street, where there were timber houses with overhanging stories, whose small-paned lattices were screened by dimity curtains on a drawing string, and under whose bargeboards old cobwebs waved in the breeze. There were houses of brick-nogging, which derived their chief support from those adjoining. There were slate roofs patched with tiles, and tile roofs patched with slate, with occasionally a roof of thatch.

The year 1880 roughly represents the end of the realistic novel as such with the rise of Moore in England, Maupassant in France, Chekhov in Russia, all of them declared Naturalists, two of them best known as short story writers. Chekhov took naturally to the theory, because as a doctor he found the detached description of natural phenomena sufficiently like the work of contemporary scientists. "Anatomy and the arts," he said, "are of equally noble descent. They have the same purpose and the same enemy

—the devil—and there is absolutely nothing for them to fight about.” There is a whole group of his stories, clinically correct descriptions of madness, degeneracy, marital unhappiness and what not, which seem to me typical museum pieces of the naturalistic school. But by nature, he was a humorous, poetic sort of man (“My ideal is to be idle and love a plump girl”, which may be set with Dr. Johnson’s of driving in a post-chaise with a pretty woman) and in the stories which are characteristically Chekhovian we are conscious that the man is better than the theory; he comments wisely and endlessly.

He is not by any means an easy writer, though like Jane Austen he is one who steadily grows on you, and for the same reason, that a quiet realism which finds its poetry in everyday things and is based upon an adequate ethical code seems to be that which retains its freshness longest. All the exciting episodes and profound moral problems which interest us so much at first, tend each time to lose something in re-reading, while Emma’s misunderstandings of Mr. Knightley’s intentions and Elizabeth Bennet’s prejudice against Mr. Darcy improve with the years. The impression you get on reading Chekhov for the first time is rather like that of walking out of a very bright light into a dim, cool, shadowy interior, mistaking the butler for your host and the local school-mistress for your hostess, and of conversing with somebody who appears to be a Polar explorer and turns out to be the village doctor. The voice of the commentator if you can discern it at all seems to be equally confusing, for it is intermittent, irritable and apologetic.

The heroine of one of his most famous stories is a doctor’s wife who becomes the mistress of an artist (you will notice as you go on an under-current of dislike for artists in Chekhov’s stories) and neglects her apparently stupid and good-natured husband, but when he dies, sucking the poison from a child’s throat, it is slowly borne in on her that everybody but herself had recognised him as a great and famous scientist. You might think she was being punished for her unfaithfulness to him until you read another story (*The Lady with the Toy Dog*, which, incidentally, is one of the great short stories of the world). This is about a young woman,

married to a dull official, who meets a married man at the seaside and becomes his mistress. She is punished too, but this time it seems to be because she does not leave her husband altogether. It is all very difficult. A woman is punished for going away with a lover, or for not going away with a lover, but the lover seems to have nothing to do with her real sin which you may find it hard to identify. But after your eyes have grown used to the shadowy interior, and your ears to the diffident voice of the commentator, you begin to discover that the stories all add up to something, and that if Chekhov's people are not being punished for adultery, they are being punished and punished very severely for quarreling at meals, leaving syringes in the bathroom, criticising the local teacher or doctor, or for being late at the office. Implicit in all of them is a very personal and very noble ideal of the lady and gentleman, derived from, but transcending, the rough and ready ethical code of the novelist.

"This soup tastes like liquorice," he said, smiling; he made an effort to control himself and seem amiable, but could not refrain from saying, "Nobody looks after the house-keeping. . . . If you are too ill or busy with reading, let me look after the cooking."

In earlier days she would have said to him: "Do, by all means," or, "I see you want to turn me into a cook," but now she only looked at him timidly and flushed crimson.

That is not just mere naturalistic detail as it would be in the work of a French writer; like the coarseness of Lydia Bennet and her mother it is intended to express by implication an ideal of conduct which Laevsky and his mistress fall short of and gives us the clue to understanding their misfortunes. Nadyezhda is deceiving him with another man, and has got herself into the other man's power; Laevsky is planning to leave her in the lurch. Unfortunately for him, though the local doctor would lend him the money, he in turn has to borrow it from a lodger, a scientist called Von Koren who loathes both Laevsky and Nadyezhda because of some stupid criticisms they have made on science. Von

Koren will not part with the money unless Laevsky guarantees to take Nadyezhda with him, and maddens Laevsky to the point of challenging him. The prospect of imminent death brings out a real element of seriousness in Laevsky's character. The duel takes place; the scientist is just on the point of killing him in cold blood when they are interrupted and the shot grazes Laevsky's neck. But he has had a shock, becomes reconciled to Von Koren, marries Nadyezhda and settles down to a dull and useful life with her.

Perhaps this isn't Chekhov's greatest story (it is superbly written) but in it the diffident voice is just a shade louder and more explicit, and the story throws light on all the other mysterious and beautiful stories which haunt our memory for years like passages of poetry. As in Shaw's *Candida* and Joyce's *Ulysses* I get the impression that the two contrasted characters, are not two characters but two different aspects of the same character, which may or may not be the author's, and that some sort of internal conflict is being externalised through them. At any rate I do not think it is fanciful to suggest that Chekhov, the doctor, the naturalist and Utopian, had a rather shady artistic *alter ego* which he found it necessary to struggle with and overthrow.

It is not enough to think of Chekhov merely as a Russian and a fellow-countryman of Dostoevsky. He is also a strict contemporary of Shaw and H. G. Wells, and has considerably more in common with them than with Dostoevsky. Like them he is fundamentally optimistic (it is only a very superficial criticism which sees Chekhov as a gloomy writer), and like them, he is optimistic because he believes in science. Where he does differ from them is that he recognises that his scientific Utopia will be unlivable in unless human beings change their behaviour. "If we respect science and culture," the commentator seems to say, "we shall in the end conquer disease and poverty and ignorance. Life in a thousand years will be unimaginably beautiful, because there is such a thing as progress. As a child I used to be beaten, so, you see, I know. But what use will progress be if it doesn't mean spiritual progress; if we are still rude to the men and women we live with, and have no useful work to keep us occupied and to help on the business of progress.

So we must all be more polite and tender and truthful, and work very much harder than we do, and then, in a thousand years' time life on this planet will be really worth while. But, of course, we mustn't take it too seriously, for we shall die all the same. But still, you know Afanasey Andreitch, my guinea-pig, my little sucking dove (or whatever bit of translator's Anglo-Russian you like to put in) we ought to work harder."

It is the final unanswerable doubting re-statement of the middle-class creed of the 19th-century novel. Since then there have been some great writers, but none of them has written under its inspiration. Those like John Galsworthy who have gone on writing novels in the convention may have been admirable writers but they are not artists. When you read a Galsworthy novel it is rather like reading one of those political manifestos which advise us to get back to the England of Palmerston or Gladstone. It isn't that one doesn't admire the period that the pamphleteer admires; it is that the pamphlet is unreal. It is impossible to write a novel in the manner of Dickens or Thackeray, because it is impossible to get back to the convictions which they shared with their audience. The middle classes, it seems, have, for the moment at least, lost faith in their own mission.

IV

I DON'T PRETEND THAT THE BOOKS I HAVE MENTIONED IN THE last chapter (and the scores of other novelists I haven't mentioned at all) are all easy reading, or that many of them may not at first pass over your head as they did over mine when I first read them. But they are a popular art; and they do, I think, contain a sufficiently substantial amount of necessary entertainment to yield up their beauty to you without too much knowledge or effort.

But when once you get back beyond the 19th century the difficulties begin. It is of no use to you to invent a sort of pedigree, and call it English literature, and treat it as an integral thing from Chaucer's day to ours. My own experience has been that while there are few famous books of the 19th century which I cannot read with pleasure, there are quite a number of 18th-century books which I cannot read

at all; and that when I go back further, the great writers I can read are outnumbered by those I can't. It is sad but true that I who can read Mr. Evelyn Waugh with the greatest pleasure have to force myself to read Ben Jonson, Montaigne and Rabelais. Mr. Dobree on the Restoration dramatists I can read with delight, but the Restoration dramatists themselves, apart from Congreve, I find very difficult to get through.

I think the fact is—and it may spare you many dreary hours of discouragement to reflect on it—that, as I have said before, literature, apart from lyric poetry, is a very imperfect art. It is composed of words, images, ideas and conventions, all of which change, many of which disappear entirely. I have argued in another place that drama is the most ephemeral of the literary arts, being based upon a collaboration between author, audience and performers. This is *not* true to anything like the same degree of literature which is intended to be read, but it is far truer than professors of literature ever care to admit, for within five or six hundred years it cannot be read at all, except by those who have devoted considerable time to a study of the language, or else in some sort of translation; while even the very best translation will be largely unintelligible unless the reader pays attention to the footnotes.

That evanescence of literature is reflected for us in criticism. Mr. Dobree seems to me to tell me all I want to know about the Restoration dramatists, but I cannot think of one single critical work on Shakespeare which I could recommend. The reason for that is simple. To write criticism you must have certain simple facts established. You must know what the author wrote and when he wrote it. You must have some rough and ready idea of his intentions when he wrote it. With Shakespeare most of these things are either very hard or impossible to establish.

Falstaff is perhaps Shakespeare's single greatest character. He was enormously popular on the stage. At the end of *Henry IV, Part II*, the author promises to bring him on the stage again in *Henry V*, but instead of that fobs us off with an account of his death (off-stage). Why? Professor Wilson in one book suggests

that Falstaff had become so popular that in order to escape a life-time of Falstaff, Shakespeare had to kill him off summarily. In a later book he accepts the theory that the actor who played Falstaff had left the company, and identifies him with William Kempe. Dr. Harrison seems to think he had lost the knack of writing about Falstaff. None of these explanations seems to me likely, and my own guess, for what it is worth, is that Lord Cobham, who had already compelled the company to alter the name of Oldcastle to Falstaff, brought influence to bear to prevent his appearance on the stage in any relation to Henry V.

That, you may think, has no importance one way or another, but, in fact, it is crucial. Whole books have been written condemning or explaining the conduct of Prince Hal in casting off old Falstaff at the end of *Henry IV*, but quite obviously, if Shakespeare intended to write a third part in which Falstaff accompanied the King to France, he must have intended some sort of reconciliation scene between them which would have altered the whole emphasis of the trilogy.

Let me take one last example from *Hamlet*. After the ghost has passed another ghost enters who to me is every bit as mysterious as the first. Marcellus asks what is going on in Denmark, and Horatio in a long speech explains that a Norwegian prince called Fortinbras is raising an army to invade Denmark. This young man is my ghost. He appears again a few scenes later when two ambassadors (two perfectly good actors from the theatre manager's point of view) are sent to Norway to protest against his warlike preparations. They return later with the news that Fortinbras *had* been intending to invade Denmark, but that the King of Norway has now persuaded him to have a go at Poland instead. Will the Danes object to his crossing Danish territory? No, the Danes do not object, so the ghost makes another appearance, this time on his way to Poland with an army. Nor is this all. He returns at the precise moment when Hamlet has been stabbed with the poisoned foil, and hearing him approach, Hamlet who has been dying in a cloud of the most exquisite poetry, sits up to give him a vote for the succession of Denmark. There are no historical notes

on that in any of my editions of *Hamlet*! It is one of the most absurd and inexplicable episodes in literature, but not much more absurd than what follows, because Fortinbras, without asking anybody's leave, announces that he intends to take the throne of Denmark anyway, and Horatio, forgetting all about his dead friend, hurriedly begs him to do it quick before anybody can anticipate him—

Even while men's minds are wild, lest some mischance
On plots, and errors happen.

Now, if you ask me what business Fortinbras has in the play, I can only reply that I haven't the foggiest notion, and that I doubt very much whether anybody else has either. As Nature abhors a vacuum, I explain it tentatively to myself by fancying that perhaps after all the date of the final draft of *Hamlet* is not 1601 but the spring months of 1603 when the old Queen was dying and Cecil trying to prepare public opinion for the accession of a most unpopular and unpleasant foreign prince; perhaps even that *Hamlet* was the very service for which James on his accession appointed Shakespeare's company as the King's Players. You may notice for instance how Rosencrantz and Guildenstern expatiate on the dangers attending "the cease of majesty" and how Laertes arrives on the scene accompanied by a mob howling to have him made king instead of Claudius; the prosaic solder with which the Fortinbras scenes are joined on like "I think it be no other but e'en so" or "this business is very well ended", and the maturity of the style—but I have said enough to suggest the difficulties that confront you in a really topical writer like Ben Jonson.

Sometimes, in reading Dante, Chaucer, Villon and even Shakespeare I am reminded of a visit to a ruined castle or abbey. Clearly, people in most ways like myself have lived and died here, and as I wander through room after room, I cannot help wondering what they were really like, and fancying that round the next corner I shall come upon some monk or girl, strayed out of history, who will tell me. I should confine myself to the architecture? I know that, and I try to do it, but human nature is very feeble, and besides I am

an ignorant man. I don't know what this wall is doing right across the nave or what room this is with a spy-hole overlooking the high altar. A genuine archæologist can help me enormously by telling me what all these things are about, which is why I would have you above everything else learn to appreciate the work of scholars, but in the end there is something which escapes me, something which I know is buried in the churchyard nearby, and that leaves me with an ache for buildings in the idiom of my own time, all with neat inscriptions on the doors: "Town Clerk," "City Engineer," "Rates Department on the Next Floor."

V

I HAVE NO DESIRE TO EXAGGERATE THE DIFFICULTIES, AND you may have gathered that I have myself succeeded in getting a considerable amount of pleasure out of Gothic abbeys and Elizabethan plays, but I am always slightly suspicious of those simple-minded villagers who are alleged to have enjoyed a performance of *Oedipus Rex*, and it is just as well to make clear that I think there are difficulties, and that all literature before the 19th century is a portion of history which has to be read in its historic context.

I should make one exception to this. If the unsophisticated villager is capable of enjoying any classic work, he would probably find less to puzzle him in a Greek play than in most of more modern date, and granted a reasonably good prose translation, I find that Aristophanes is considerably fresher than Swift and Xenophon than Gibbon.

That may be merely a fancy of mine, but it is what one would expect, because the historical context which embraces Swift and Gibbon is part of an historical process which began with the Greeks. I cannot read a single word of either Greek or Latin, and most of the arguments which defend the teaching of them as "a mental discipline" and what not seem to me grotesque. The real significance of the classical languages is that our whole civilisation is based on them; that the way we think, the way we feel, Mr. Eliot's latest poem and the atomic bomb, all derive ultimately from certain principles laid down by Greek thinkers and writers five hundred years before Christ, and established throughout

Europe by Roman armies and administrators, and that if the study of Greek and Latin ceased throughout Europe, our civilisation would collapse in ruin within fifty years.

You will understand that better if you consider what happens to Christianity whenever knowledge of the Bible declines, and how every movement leading to reform in the Church begins with a return to Biblical simplicity. The classics are to civilisation as a whole what the Bible is to religion. They are our charter, our terms of reference, and whenever we depart from them it is in the direction of barbarism. What we call realism in art is the artistic equivalent of logical thought, and the intricate Celtic pattern on a coin or shield and the wild fantasy of the Irish saga *Tain Bo Cualgne* are both barbarian attempts to imitate a realistic Roman figure or a Latin epic poem. Even in England you can't go very far without coming upon a church or house which reminds you of Pope's, "We still defied the Romans as of old."

When we cross the border from the 19th to the 18th century we find ourselves in an alien world, a country infinitely more foreign to us than Russia or China of our own time. And that feeling of strangeness isn't a new thing. Matthew Arnold, who, Heaven knows, was no jingo, had to invent a theory that the English had a better sense of what was fitting to the stage than the French in order to explain to himself why he liked Shakespeare's blank verse, and did not like French rhymed couplets. Hardy, who delights to describe every detail of a 16th-century house, dismisses an 18th century one in a few curt lines as "a compilation". I believe I could even put my hand on the guide-book to Bath which apologises for the fact that, apart from the Abbey, the town has no architectural interest!

When we open the work of an 18th-century writer, as likely as not, we shall light upon some passage which does not seem to be addressed to us at all; which is like one of those conversations we overhear on the telephone, and which always sound so absurd when we recount them afterwards. Take this for instance: "In my humble opinion, the clergy's business lies entirely among the laity; neither is there, perhaps, a more effectual way to forward the salvation of men's

souls, than for spiritual persons to make themselves as agreeable as they can in the conversations of the world; for which a learned education gives them a great advantage, if they would please to improve and apply it." Now, that is not from the pen of any obscure country parson; it is the work of Dean Swift who is rightly one of the most famous figures of the century, but to me it is exactly like a stranger's voice gabbling wildly on the telephone, and having given it a few doubtful "Hello's" without attracting its attention, I make another determined effort to get on to the exchange.

Close by these Meads for ever crown'd with Flow'rs,
Where Thames with Pride surveys his rising Tow'rs
There stands a Structure of Majestic Fame,
Which from the neighb'ring Hampton takes its Name.

What was it our grandfathers disliked so much about all this? What was it that made them uncomfortable in long, broad, beautifully proportioned streets of red-brick Georgian houses? Principally it was the social approach. Our grandfathers were more individualistic than we; they came home from business through Romanesque railway stations to some neat little Gothic or Tudor villa, packed with the spoils of half a dozen civilisations, and when they felt religious read a chapter of the Bible or the Bhagavad Gita.

Yes, in the sea of life enisl'd,
With echoing straits between us thrown,
Dotting the shoreless watery wild,
We mortal millions live *alone*—

sang Matthew Arnold, underlining the last word lest there might be any possible misunderstanding about it, and, considering the best advice he might offer to a restless generation, set up as ideals of conduct the stars and the tides.

And with joy the stars perform their shining,
And the sea its long moon-silvered roll.
For alone they live, nor pine with noting
All the fever of some differing soul.

If he and his contemporaries did not fully appreciate the 18th century it was not that they did not know Greek and Latin. It was principally that they knew other things also, and that they were quite ready to compound a Whole Duty of Man from the classics, the Bible, Shakespeare and the Bhagavad Gita. That was what really upset them—what still upsets us though to a lesser degree because we have seen the effects of cultural eclecticism—the amazing way 18th-century culture is integrated into the social system. Other periods have national differentiations of a sort, and the 16th century in England is not quite the same as the 16th century anywhere else, but the culture of the 18th century stretches from Limerick to Leningrad, and one of its most characteristic poems, Bryan Merrymann's *Midnight Court*, comes from a wild Irish-speaking district in the hills over the Shannon which is still at the back of beyond. Other periods talk a lot to themselves about such things for instance as the dangers incident to "the cease of majesty" or the growing arrogance of play actors, but rarely without letting us hear pretty soon the lonely human lyric voice. "I will live in thy heart, die in thy lap and be buried in thy eyes: and moreover, I will go with thee to thy uncle's." No period talks to itself so consistently as the 18th century, none throws off less of those lyric passages which fit so neatly into a Whole Duty of Man or would be so astonished at being advised to imitate the stars.

The 18th century in literature then is a number of people who for the most part talk to themselves rather than to us; "spiritual persons" and "men of quality" with "a learned education" (meaning a classical education), which they are pleased to "improve and apply" for the benefit of "polite society". They live in very large and very formal houses which to our eyes, accustomed to the joyous eclecticism of railway Romanesque and university Gothic, all seem to be as like as council houses, and if we succeed in getting past the formal fronts we are astonished by the gaiety and colourfulness of the decoration (though whether this is because the English nature inclines to outward reserve and intimate abandon or not, I leave you to decide). The men and women

shave their heads and wear wigs; Homer is not allowed to nod and talks in heroic couplets,

But why should'st thou suspect the war's success?
None fears it more as none promotes it less.

Religion has lost much of its terrors, for spiritual persons make themselves as agreeable as they can, and the writers, instead of living *alone* in Gothic villas, meditating upon human destiny, try to make themselves useful and popular—for what is the good of a great poet if he is not agreeable?

This utilitarian view of religion and culture is one of the characteristic and disturbing things about the period. Our grandfathers wisely or unwisely elaborated æsthetics to the point at which they could satisfy themselves that a thing was beautiful in itself, regardless of purpose, and we in our turn are prepared to concede that an abstract pattern *may* be a work of art or that Joyce's description of a sexual pervert in *Dubliners* is justified by the beauty of the writing. It is always rather surprising to find the 18th century looking for a definite purpose. What lesson does Othello teach? it asks itself. Should one describe a great man's vices when writing his biography, and is the description calculated to make others imitate him or to avoid the dangers?

Again it is the social, utilitarian approach which we are most aware of when we try to discover the characteristic literature of the period. That the superior of the local seminary should be regularly entrusted with the task of lacing Mme. de Waren's stays was nothing unusual—was it not the duty of spiritual persons to make themselves agreeable? Church-going was a social function, so that sermons became a very important and popular form of literature, shading off into meditations and essays aimed at the correction of social abuses. Essays themselves shade off into pamphlets, and these were innumerable and written by the best intellects of the time. When we open Swift's works we cannot but be slightly shocked at their apparent triviality and inconsequence. That so very great a writer should have turned out so many ephemeral trifles on Education, Style, Astrologers and other Quacks, Money, Beggars and Politics, not to mention that

Project for the Advancement of Religion from which I have already quoted, is something that to our minds is bound to appear extravagant.

Conversation which in a period so social must have been magnificent we can only guess at from books like Fanny Burney's *Diary* and *Boswell*. It was the art to which all the other arts led up. The men of talent by their labours had produced the most cultivated society seen in Western Europe since classical times and enjoyed the benefit of it. Not only do we feel in reading the letters of Oxford to Swift that no man of intellect of our own time has the cultural richness of one who was, after all, a very indifferent politician, but we feel in reading Swift and Johnson that no politician of our time has anything like the profound knowledge of life possessed by these men, both poets, both religious men with a wealth of piety and charity in their make-up, Swift at least a raging idealist.

Nothing perhaps expresses this period so well as its letters for they are the literary equivalent of conversation. Cowper's descriptions of the little events of village life, Walpole's of society, Swift and Pope on literature are admirable, though none of them so perfect as those of the earlier Mme. de Sévigné: some piece of gossip from the court, a domestic misunderstanding, a question about her attitude to approaching death serves as theme for some little exquisite bubble of prose intended for the amusement of a few friends. And this is the real difficulty we shall probably find, the inability to detach the literature from the gossip, to disintegrate something so highly articulated as this classical civilisation.

It is a mistake to try to do so; to come to the 18th century looking for a Shakespeare or a Villon, for a *Divine Comedy* or a *Canterbury Tales*. The greatness of Swift is a part of the greatness of the 18th century, and whereas we get an overwhelming picture of the greatness of Shakespeare while knowing practically nothing about him, Swift's works are little more than a sketch of the man whom his contemporaries admired. And I think it is perhaps truer of this than of any other period that the more you know about it, the more you realise the greatness of its great men. It is like

a jig-saw puzzle in the way in which things which regarded by themselves seem unimportant, become important when they are regarded together. This is Swift, ridiculing Partridge, the fashionable astrologer, by posing as Isaac Bickerstaff, a rival with a serious grasp of the profession—a mild enough squib which must, of course, have delighted the London society which knew all about Partridge but tends to hang a bit heavy on the mind of a modern reader.

“ My first prediction is but a trifle, yet I will mention it to show how ignorant these sottish pretenders to Astrology are in their own concerns: it relates to Partridge the Almanack-maker; I have consulted the star of his nativity by my own rules, and find he will infallibly die upon the 29th of March next, about eleven at night, of a raging fever; therefore I advise him to consider of it, and settle his affairs in time.”

Shortly after he publishes an account of the supposed death of Partridge described by an intimate.

“ After half an hour's conversation I took my leave, being half stifled by the closeness of the room. I imagined he could not hold out long, and therefore withdrew to a little coffee house hard by, leaving a servant at the house with orders to come immediately, and tell me as near as he could the minute when Partridge should expire, which was not above two hours after; when looking upon my watch, I found it to be above five minutes after seven; by which it is clear that Mr. Bickerstaff was mistaken almost two hours in his calculation.”

That, as I say, now seems rather a damp squib, but turn to Pope's description of Swift in London, and notice how Swift's solemn raillery gives you the very accent which people heard when they first read the Bickerstaff papers; how in an art so very social as irony it helps you to distinguish the brisk, businesslike tone of Swift, driving the joke right through to the last limit of absurdity from, for instance, the languid, malicious feminine irony of Gibbon which barely troubles to take the edge off the sneer.

“Heyday, gentlemen (says the Doctor), what’s the meaning of this visit? How came you to leave all the great lords you are so fond of, to come hither to see a poor Dean?”—
 “Because we would rather see you than any of them.”—
 “Anyone that did not know so well as I do, might believe you. But since you are come, I must get some supper for you, I suppose.”—“No, Doctor, we have supped already.”—
 “Supped already, that’s impossible! Why, it is not eight o’clock yet. That’s very strange! But if you had not supped, I must have got something for you. Let me see, what should I have had? a couple of lobsters; ay, that would have done very well; two shillings—tarts a shilling: but you will drink a glass of wine with me, though you supped so much before your usual time only to spare my pocket.”—
 “No, we had rather talk with you than drink with you.”—
 “But if you had supped with me, as in all reason you ought to have done, you must then have drunk with me. A bottle of wine, two shillings—two and two is four and one is five; just two and sixpence apiece. There, Pope, there’s half a crown for you, and there’s another for you, sir; for I won’t save anything by you, I am determined.” This was all said and done with his usual seriousness on such occasions; and in spite of everything we could say to the contrary, he actually obliged us to take the money.”

But why should I stress the point when it is made already in Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*? Johnson was of the stuff of Swift and Pope, a man whom his contemporaries recognised as a great man, yet whose published works would make even a lesser show than Swift’s or Pope’s. Without Boswell we should know him as the compiler of a Dictionary and the author of some very shrewd criticisms; a respectable talent certainly, but it was Boswell’s genius which realised that by gathering together all his friend dissipated in conversation, letter writing and occasional journalism, he could create the masterpiece which Johnson himself would never create.

That great book which synthesises the whole 18th century for us is at the same time not of the 18th century at all, any more than Boswell himself was. It is part of a movement which was rising up to destroy the classical view of life. Under

all the superficial contentment with their lot it is hard not to feel that men of letters were profoundly unhappy. How can one ignore the fact that Cowper, Swift and Johnson, all three religious men, were either deranged or overthrown by insanity? The attempt at self-discipline, the approximation to classical standards had been going on for such a very long time, and become so much more exacting that it actually seems to have distorted the intellect of men who could not hold themselves on so tight a rein. At any rate I cannot overlook the fact that if I were asked to choose the three great books of the 18th century, all three would be autobiographies of one sort or another; Boswell's *Life*, Saint Simon's *Memoirs* and Rousseau's *Confessions*. Autobiography is the art of the misfit, and though two of these books appear to be straightforward descriptions of individuals or groups, I think you will find that the other people are described in immediate relation to the writer, and that in describing them he is working off some unhappiness of his own; is as it were on tiptoe, talking to us beyond his century and his circumstances as the great writers of all ages try to do.

The *Life of Johnson* has been a booby trap for people of every period. Boswell was a great but unhappy man who because of his race and upbringing was incapable of living up to the 18th-century conception of a gentleman. Even his own man-servant reproved him for being so badly educated. "Monsieur has not the manners of a gentleman. His heart is too open." He suffered atrociously from the emotional instability of a primitive race brought into contact with a civilisation which was perhaps the most stable the world had known; his extreme sensibility made him subject to violent emotional upheavals which plunged him from one excess into another. In him we are always conscious of the screaming of the bagpipes, the childlike goodness and the vicious propensities, the rapturous affection and unreasonable malice. "This evening, while some of the tunes of ordinary composition were played with no great skill, my frame was agitated, and I was conscious of a generous attachment to Dr. Johnson, as my preceptor and friend, mixed with an affectionate regret that he was an old man, whom I should probably lose in a short time. I thought I could defend him at the point

of my sword. My reverence and affection for him were in full glow." After reporting fully the remark of Johnson's that a madman loves to be in the company of those he stands in awe of, he quite innocently remarks that he himself "complained of a wretched changefulness, so that I could not preserve, for any long continuance, the same views of anything. It was most comfortable to me to experience in Dr. Johnson's company, a relief from this uneasiness. His steady vigorous mind held firm before me those objects which my own feeble and tremulous imagination frequently presented in such a wavering state that my reason could not judge well of them." His dependence upon Johnson's balance sometimes makes us shout with laughter as when he says: "Even the powerful mind of Johnson seemed foiled by futurity."

But it is a very shallow amusement to laugh at Boswell without realising first that his hysterical emotionalism, of a piece with MacPherson's *Ossian*, Scott's wild romanticism and the terrifying sentiment of Burns, was part of a wave of rebellion which was tossing beneath the whole smooth surface of 18th-century life and breaking into foam only on those wild fringes where the Romans had not left their tracks; and secondly, without appreciating the supreme artistry with which he uses it. Sometimes he exaggerates it deliberately and dramatises himself as freely as he dramatises Johnson, but one should never forget that it is this clash of opposites, the reaction upon a quivering sensibility of a superbly integrated character which throws that character into such startling relief. Johnson, written about in the same style by a man of his own type, would never have produced a masterpiece. So read it not as the impression left by a great man on a little one, but as a portrait of a Roman by a Celt, of the 18th century by the century which followed; or call it *Sense and Sensibility* and read it as the masterpiece which Jane Austen, because of her partisanship of sense, did not succeed in writing.

Boswell's *Life of Johnson* is a strange book, but probably the strangest book of the period is Saint Simon's *Memoirs of the Court of Louis XIV*, and I regret that more than a hundred years after its publication, there is not even a reasonably good translation or selection to be had in English—not at any

rate, within my means. Like Boswell it is one of these great capacious comforting books one can fall back on in hours of depression. Like Boswell, too, it is sufficiently wrong-headed to reassure us about the humanity of the writer. Saint Simon drivelling away about the hereditary rights of the peerage or the shocking, unheard-of, anarchic precedence which the doting King is granting to the royal bastards might be Boswell fulminating about the wickedness of those who opposed the ancient, honourable, humanitarian business of the slave trader. There is even something similar about the inspiration of the two men. "I felt a pleasure in walking about Derby," says Boswell, "such as I always have in walking about any town to which I am not accustomed. There is an immediate sensation of novelty; and one speculates on the way in which life is passed in it, which although there is a sameness everywhere upon the whole, is yet minutely diversified. The minute diversities in every thing are wonderful." That is Boswell, but it might as well be Saint Simon.

"I find myself," he writes, "between the fear of repetitiousness and that of not sufficiently explaining in detail curious things which we miss in all the histories and almost all the memoirs of different periods. One would like to see in them princes with their mistresses and their ministers, in their everyday life." There was one very good reason for this which Saint Simon knew as well as anyone, and he realised that his own memoirs could not appear, if they appeared at all, until after his death. (They were not published until after the Revolution.) He was literally writing as a dead man, for somebody not yet born, some serious-minded lad like himself who, closing the history book, would cover his eyes and think (as we have most of us thought at one time or another). "But I wonder what it was really like?" "And did you once see Shelley plain?" He dips his pen again and writes away furiously in a string of loosely connected ungrammatical clauses, covering two more sheets with a description of the agonies suffered by the ladies who travelled with Louis XIV because he liked fresh air and objected to women's causing the carriage to halt while they relieved themselves. And at

once we are in the carriage with these great ladies, rich and cultured beyond anything we could imagine, with the greatest men in the world for lovers, yet in misery like servant girls from the country travelling for the first time by train. And Saint Simon, inspired by the thought of those who will read the lines after he himself is rotten, adds complacently: "These things which seem to be nothing, and which in fact are nothing, are too characteristic to be omitted."

"These things which seem to be nothing and are nothing"—that contains the very essence of Saint Simon; the man on tiptoe, the awareness of time to come, the voice we hear rather than the voice we overhear. Even French critics, usually so discerning, have done small justice to Saint Simon, and assume that his fondness for discovering these great ladies in distress or chattering on their close-stools, is some sort of schoolboy obsession or inspired by some hatred of life like Swift's; but they forget that the adorable Dauphine who skips through his pages like an April day, and whom he like all the other courtiers worshipped, is described in precisely the same way; and when he has done dissecting her features, almost all but the eyes hideous to our judgment, he will cry out: "The graces grew of their own accord from her every step, her every gesture and her most commonplace utterance."

He is, of course, one of the best of all gossip writers. Think of the glorious fable about the girl queen of Spain who got homesick after her marriage and wanted to go home to her mother, and Saint Simon's sardonic amusement at the proceedings of the Council of State which was called to consider this national crisis. But a good story is never enough for him. The root of the matter is in men and women, particularly in men with women; and so we get that astounding description of the etiquette of the Spanish court, and begin to suspect with Saint Simon that the whole trend of Spanish politics is affected by the fact that the King and Queen, apart from the short period allotted each morning to private audiences, are always together; even their close-stools are set side by side; or we follow him through the grounds of Marly in the train of the King of France and Mme. de Maintenon.

"The King often walked in front beside the chair. At every moment he took off his hat and stooped to speak to Mme. de Maintenon, or reply to her if she spoke to him, which happened less frequently, for he always had something to say or point out to her. As she feared the air even in the finest, calmest weather, she pushed the window sideways each time with three fingers and shut it again immediately. Put down to look at the new fountain, the same thing took place. Sometimes the Dauphine came and perched on one of the front poles, but the front window remained always shut. At the end of the walk the King escorted Mme. de Maintenon to a point near the château, where he took his leave and resumed his walk." And once more we catch Saint Simon on tiptoe, speaking to us across the centuries. "It was a sight one could not get used to. These trifles almost always escape the memoir writers. Nevertheless, more than anything else, they give us a precise idea of all that we look for in (books), which is the character of what has once existed, which is thus shown naturally by the circumstances."

For that, after all, is how history is made, and not by grave decisions taken in council. Spanish etiquette put the comrades of the King and Queen side by side, and Louis XIV conducted the business of State in Mme. de Maintenon's apartments of a winter's evening while she read or embroidered.

"She heard all that passed between the King and the minister who both spoke in fairly loud voices. She rarely interrupted, even more rarely did she interrupt with any remark of consequence. The King often asked her advice. Then she replied with great circumspection. Never, or hardly ever, did she appear to set her heart on anything, still less, to favour anyone; but she was in an understanding with the minister who in private dared not refuse anything she asked, and even less to fail her in her presence. . . .

That done (an understanding come to between them) the minister made a proposal and produced a list of candidates. If by chance the King paused at the man whom Mme. de Maintenon favoured, the minister left it at that, and acted

as though they need proceed no further. If the King lingered over somebody else, the minister suggested that they should first glance over the other names, and then let the King give his views, taking advantage of this to exclude. He rarely expressly proposed the man he favoured, but always a number, whom he played off one against the other so as to confuse the King. Then the King asked his advice, and he went through the qualifications of a few, coming to rest finally on the man he favoured. The King nearly always weighed the matter, and asked Mme. de Maintenon's opinion. She smiled, played the incompetent, sometimes said a word for somebody else, and then came back, if she had not already done so, to the man whom the minister had recommended, and clinched it at that; so much so that three-quarters of the favours and appointments and three-quarters more of the remaining quarter, which passed through the hands of ministers working in her apartments, were disposed of by her."

Literature then has two dimensions, a dimension in time which is history, and a dimension in space which is contemporary literature. From the first we derive our standards, our sense of what is important and what is of merely temporary significance, from the other the living impact of contemporary thought which is too confused to allow us to do much more than guess at what is important in it and what is not, whose writers are people relatively as well as absolutely like ourselves, and in whom we do not have to separate the incidentals of period, race and profession. Without that, I doubt if one can appreciate literature at all. One would like to meet Meres, who by 1598 had realised that Shakespeare was a writer comparable with the greatest of classical times, or even Webster, who in 1610 was still under the impression that he was a mere theatrical hack like Heywood, but spare us from the man who knows the winner after the race is won! Whenever you hear somebody say "I really can't be bothered with modern poetry" or "When somebody advises me to read a new book I read an old one instead" it is a safe guess, in the absence of further evidence, that this is somebody who is incapable of appreciating any literature, new or old; an

antiquarian who likes the element of history in literature for its own sake.

I was still quite a young man when in a Paris bookshop I saw a book called *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower* by a writer called Marcel Proust whom I had never heard of. I took the book for the sake of the title, but it was months before I settled down to read it. My first impression was one of intense disappointment. It seemed to have very little to do with girls and nothing at all to do with flowers. Then suddenly one day I began to be excited by it. I can still go through the book and notice the things that interested me then.

"Still Gilberte did not always return to the Champs Elysees. Nevertheless, I needed to see her, because I could not remember even her face. The searching, anxious, exacting way in which we look at the woman we love, our expectation of the words which will give or withdraw the hope of a meeting next day, and (till the words are uttered) the alternative if not actually simultaneous vision of delight or despair—all this makes our attention before the beloved too unstable to allow it receive a precise image. Perhaps also this activity of all the senses together which tries to identify something external to themselves by means of the sight alone, makes them more indulgent to the thousand forms, the savours, the movements of the living woman; when we do not love a thing we immobilise it. The beloved model, on the other hand, moves; we never have anything but spoiled photographs."

What was it, this queer sinuous quality, which took something a 19th century novelist would have dismissed in a line, and dissected and then expanded it into an almost independent existence. You couldn't call it a novel: it ran to sixteen volumes, and all the incident it contained could have been adequately dealt with in one. It was more like a commentary on a novel. For instance, a sentence like this occupied my mind for days. "It is our attention which puts objects into a room, and habit which takes them out again and leaves space for ourselves there." Or this: "It

is always in a temporary state of mind that we take definitive resolutions." Or this: "One builds one's life for a woman's sake, and when at last one can receive her there, she does not come, and dies so far as oneself is concerned, and then one lives on, a prisoner in a house which was intended only for her."

Even stranger than the form of the book were the theories it suggested, and which become clarified in the later volumes: that the essential realities of literature are not contained in the conscious mind at all, but in the memory and the subconscious mind from which the writer dredges them. "The artist's labour, of trying to perceive under matter, under experience, under words, something which differs from them, is exactly the inverse labour to that which, at every moment when we live diverted from ourselves, self-love, passion, intelligence and habit also accomplish in us, by heaping above our real impressions to hide them from us the names and practical aims of what we falsely call life."

That great book which still delights me as much as it did when I first read it was my inseparable companion for months. It seemed to summarise and explain many things which troubled me in contemporary literature. It complemented the very different work of James Joyce which in those days I read nearly as much.

Joyce's earlier stories were straightforward imitations of naturalistic stories in the manner of Flaubert. Joyce was a man with a curiously sensitive ear, and had a terrific tendency to parody. For instance, this is how he ends one of his stories: "'What do you think of that, Crofton?' cried Mr. Hency. 'Isn't that fine? What?'" Mr. Crofton said it was a very fine piece of writing"—which may or may not remind you of Flaubert's ending to the tale of Herodias "As it (the head) was very heavy, they carried it turn and turn about."

But naturalism has one fatal weakness which shows how much it has derived from a painter's studio. After you have described a scene as if it were a leg of mutton, there is quite a lot of loose creative stuff hanging about in you, and it has a tendency to make the pendulum swing in an alarming way. For instance, Ibsen begins with a sort of symbolism, swings violently in the direction of naturalism and swings

back even more violently into symbolism again. In Flaubert it had the effect of driving him to romantic excesses of the wildest kind. The form it took in Joyce was autobiography. The *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is Joyce looking back on his childhood and boyhood in Dublin. The remarkable thing about it is that it is not all written in one style. In Joyce's early work he had shown a remarkable aptitude for copying the style of another writer, and between the first draft, portion of which has been published under the title of *Stephen Hero*, and the completed version, he had taken the fancy to write in a succession of styles which would convey a sense of the change from childhood into boyhood and adolescence. It begins in baby talk, and when Joyce is describing himself at the age of ten or twelve he writes in the style of a schoolboy's essay.

"It was queer they hadn't given him any medicine. Perhaps Brother Michael would bring it back when he came. They said you got stinking stuff to drink when you were in the infirmary. But he felt better now than before. It would be nice getting better slowly. You could get a book then. There was a book in the library about Holland."

When he is a few years older and discovers religion for the first time, the style is modified again and becomes sickly-sweet in the manner of a devotional book for young people.

"It was easy to be good. God's yoke was sweet and light. It was better never to have sinned, to have remained always a child, for God loved little children and suffered them to come to Him. It was a terrible and a sad thing to sin. But God was merciful to poor sinners who were truly sorry. How true that was! That was indeed goodness."

After that young Daedalus goes to the university, and the style changes to a nauseating imitation of the Pateresque prose of the nineties. Notice how the principal words are repeated mechanically: touch, touch, touch, touch; woman, woman, woman; figure, figure, boy, boy, in a maddeningly

wearisome way; yet in its place in the book this passage does give us a sense of the sick sentimentality of adolescence.

"The soft beauty of the Latin word touched with an enchanting touch the dark of the evening, with a touch fainter and more persuading than the touch of music or of a woman's hand. The strife of their minds was quelled. The figure of a woman as she appears in the liturgy of the church passed silently through the darkness: a white-robed figure, small and slender as a boy, and with a falling girdle. Her voice, frail and high as a boy's, was heard intoning from a distant choir the first words of a woman which pierce the gloom and clamour of the first chanting of the Passion: *Et tu cum Jesu Galilæao eras.*

And all hearts were touched and turned to her voice, shining like a young star, shining clearer as the voice intoned the proparoxyton and more faintly as the cadence died."

But it was not so much that book, though I must have read it scores of times, which really excited my generation. *Ulysses* opened up a new world to us. It is the story of one day in the life of two Dubliners: Daedalus, the hero of *Portrait of the Artist*, and a Jew called Bloom. Both are lonely; Stephen Daedalus has lost his religion and left his family; Bloom has lost his son and his wife is unfaithful to him. They are followed all day in their wanderings; at times they almost meet. They meet at night in a brothel, and when Daedalus gets involved in a brawl with two drunken English soldiers, the Jew forgets himself and calls "Stephen!" The whole vast book is centred about that one word which passes unnoticed both by Bloom and Stephen; and when it has been spoken the two men begin to drift apart again; the world turns towards morning, and their essential solitude is resumed.

Because Bloom made Joyce think of Ulysses in the Greek epic, the whole story is made to fit into the framework of the *Odyssey*, and the various episodes of the poem have their counterparts in the book. *The Lotus Eaters* has its counterpart in the Turkish Bath; *Hades* in Glasnevin Cemetery. The style of each episode is varied to correspond with the

subject. In the episode in the lying-in hospital the birth of a child is represented by a series of parodies of English prose from its earliest example to the present day—an elaboration of the trick he had used in *Portrait of the Artist*. *Proteus* takes place on Sandymount Strand, and as sand is itself an image of change, the style drifts along, mirroring change in every form.

“In long lassoes from the Cockle Lake the water flowed full, covering green-goldenly lagoons of sand, rising, flowing. My ashplant will float away. I shall wait. No, they will pass on, passing chafing against the low rocks, swirling, passing. Better get this job over quick. Listen: a four-worded wave-speech: seesoo, hrss, rseiss, oos. Vehement breath of waters and seasnakes, rearing horses, rocks. In cups of rocks it slops, slop, slop, slap: bounded in barrels. And spent, its speech ceases. It flows purling, widely flowing, floating foampool, flower unfurling.”

Even more fantastic in conception and style was Joyce's last work, *Finnegan's Wake*, which I cannot read now, but which delighted me when it first began to appear. The hero of this (at least, so we are told) is a Dublin publican with his wife, two sons and a daughter (though these, too, we must take on trust from those who have had it from the stables because we never meet them). The hero has fallen asleep before the book opens, and in his dreams imagines himself to be Dublin, his wife the River Liffey, his sons the North Side and South Side, the respectable and Bohemian extremes of the city. He has, it seems, been flirting with a nursemaid, and is actually tried by a court consisting of the Four Evangelists and the Twelve Apostles. There are no characters, merely principles; men are earth and women water, and they change their shapes and relive mythology and history. *Ulysses* was based on the *Odyssey*. This is based on the philosophy of Vico, a form of the cyclic theory of civilisation. The thunder begins it; civilisation begins with religion, and works through various phases till it has completed its circle and then reverts. It is the same theory

which inspires all Yeats' later poetry. "All things fall and are built again;"

Man's life is thought,
And he, despite his terror, cannot cease,
Ravening through century after century.
Ravening, raging and uprooting that he may come
Into the desolation of reality.

The style is as abnormal as the conception, because almost every word and sentence is distorted as it is in dreams in which we can dream the word "umbrella" and know perfectly well that it really means "whiskey", some censor of the soul having endeavoured to conceal from us the fact that we like whiskey. In Joyce the inflection of a word may mean that, or it may mean that the dreamer is thinking of a previous existence in which he was St. Michael the Archangel or Dean Swift.

There was a third writer who had the same sort of influence on my generation as Proust and Joyce. That was D. H. Lawrence. Like Joyce, he began as a story-teller in the old sense of the word, and from the purely literary point of view, never again wrote anything so good as his first important novel, *Sons and Lovers*. His later works are prophetic and religious. Lawrence has some quality which is very difficult to define, some extreme sensitiveness to nature and the forces of nature. He could describe people in a field, and the people would be shadows, but the field would be a personality. As primitive people have faculties sharper than ours, Lawrence seems to have had an extraordinary sense of the natural powers flowing through life, obstructed by man-made notions and creeds. Ultimately, his was the revolt of the senses against the mind, against knowledge in any rational form, and a reversion to sheer animal instinct. It is probably useless to try to formulate such a creed in words because there are no words to adumbrate it. Nor was Lawrence the patient sort of writer who sits for days in agony waiting for an equivalent image to form in his mind. The creative impulse flowed through him

continuously, and poured out of him in travel sketches, stories and poems in which places, people, and incidents are caricatured in impatient, sometimes hysterical language, yet even at his most outrageous, we never feel he is talking nonsense. We feel, as we often feel with dreams, that the creative impulse has been trying to say something to us, and that nothing is wrong but the words.

But the fact that these three writers were the most representative and influential of their time shows just how far the world of the 19th-century novel had been shaken. Each of them instead of dealing with the social reality was digging away at its roots; each of them instead of writing novels was writing autobiography of one sort or another. There were other important writers like Virginia Woolf in England and Kafka in Germany who were doing the same sort of thing in slightly different ways, and wherever a novelist tried to write the 19th century type of novel, as Galsworthy did in *The Forsythe Saga*, it seemed incredibly meaningless and old-fashioned. It bore the same relation to living literature as Drinkwater's "I've never been to Mamble that lies upon the Teme" bore to Eliot's ugly powerful poetry.

What had happened to make Galsworthy seem old-fashioned? I think much the same sort of thing that happened to make 18th century poetry seem old-fashioned to our grandfathers, but on a far greater scale. The rule of the middle classes liberated certain forces which hadn't been calculated on. Countrysides were drained of life and cities expanded with a vast army of people who had lost their traditional life and had not found a civilised one to replace it. Scientific discovery went on, and faced with distances and periods of time which staggered the human imagination, traditional belief declined. Even in *Madame Bovary* we can see the writer's sensitive nature withdrawing from contact with this ubiquitous crude humanity without any rich interior life, without even the instinct which enables the bird to build its nest. It is at this point that we begin to perceive the rent in our civilisation; either the mind turns inwards looking for the richness it has lost, which produces autobiographical writing, or it looks at the bank

holiday crowd with distasteful objectivity. *Ulysses* combines the two, the introspection of Stephen Daedalus and the spiritual emptiness of Mr. Bloom.

"Never know anything about it. Waste of time. Gasballs spinning about, crossing each other, passing. Same old ding-dong always. Gas, then solid, then world, then cold, then dead shell drifting round, frozen rock like that pineapple rock."

That, of course, is not only the Little Man, but Joyce himself and all of us.

"He must be fed up with that job, shaking that thing over all the corpses they trot up. What harm if he could see what he was shaking it over. Every mortal day a fresh batch: middle-aged men, old women, children, women dead in childbirth, men with beards, bald-headed business men, consumptive girls with little sparrows' breasts. All the year round he prayed the same thing over them all and shook water on top of them: sleep. On Dignam now.—*In paradisum*. Said he was going to paradise or is in paradise. Says that over everybody. Tiresome kind of job. But he has to say something."

What can one do with the Little Man? We see some novelists in a fury of rage turning to Catholicism, and Graham Greene makes his hero of a murderer who is also a pious Catholic. Far better to be a murderer, and damn your soul consistently and burn forever in Hell than believe that "it's only gasballs spinning about. Same old ding-dong." Others turn Communist—the Little Man is very susceptible to organisation; all he wants is to be told what to do. Not having any soul to damn he can be killed off in very large numbers as required—Kulaks, Communists, Japanese—the atomic bomb is a notable addition to the list of valuable scientific discoveries and will shortly make it impossible for the Little Man to live in cities at all.

Ravening, raging and uprooting that he may come
Into the desolation of reality.

But this, after all, is a book about literature, not about philosophy, and you do not want to know whether I think the solution is in authoritarianism or in Communism, or whether I believe with Yeats that a cycle of life is over and a new Dark Age beginning. If I have introduced all these disturbing ideas, it is only because literature is communication, and while it lifts the burden of solitude and puts us in contact with other minds, it puts us in contact with their doubts and fears as well as with their pleasures and hopes.